Exploring the Dynamics between Brand Investment, Customer Investment, Brand Identification, and Brand Identity Fusion

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the dynamics between customers' own and perceived brand investment, and the impact of such investment on two relational outcomes, i.e., identification and brand identity fusion. Integrating literature on relationship investment with identification scholarship, and drawing on social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) this study sought to explicate the linkages between brands' and customers' relationship investment and identification and brand identity fusion. The results from an online survey (N = 559) revealed that when customers perceive a brand to make economic and social investment into customer-brand relationships, they tend to reciprocate the efforts with similar types of investment. Furthermore, perceived brand social investment and customer extrinsic investment further engender customers' brand identification and brand identity fusion. The results of this study make several contributions to relationship investment and identification literature, and practical contributions for managers (149 words).

Keywords: Brand identification, brand identity fusion, brand social investment, customer-brand relationship, extrinsic customer investment, intrinsic customer investment

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1. Introduction

The concept of customer-brand relationships is one that is central to marketing and management literature as well as to business practice, as more companies are investing their resources into developing deep, meaningful relationships with their customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus, much scholarship has been devoted to understanding customer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), their antecedents and the outcomes of such relationships, in the quest to help businesses achieve the proverbial Holy Grail: extremely loyal customers who will be active advocates for the brands they love (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Recent developments in consumer psychology literature have shone a light on the identity perspective of customer-brand relationships to help develop such customer advocates, advancing the notion of *brand identity fusion* (Krishna & Kim, 2020; Lin & Sung, 2014) as the “ultimate destination for consumer brand relationships” (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 55).

Defined as "the merging of individual (customer) and identity of the brand in the mind of the customer such that the individual may see threats to the brand as a threat to one’s self" (Krishna & Kim, 2020, p. 7), brand identity fusion has recently been posited as a powerful force that not only drives consumers’ loyalty and positive word-of-mouth behaviors (Lin & Sung, 2014), but also protects the brand from customer backlash in times of crisis (Krishna & Kim, 2020). However, few studies have sought to understand how brands may encourage brand identity fusion among their customers, as existing literature does not provide insights into the antecedents of brand identity fusion. The present study seeks to contribute to the literature by addressing this gap.

Although the concept of brand identity fusion has been relatively underexplored in extant marketing and relationship literature, much scholarship has been devoted to understanding customer-brand relationships and their antecedents (e.g., Breivik & Thorbjornsen, 2008; Sung & Choi, 2010). In particular, scholars have drawn upon Rusbult's (1980) Relationship Investment Model to suggest that customer-brand relationships are a function of customers' investment size into the relationship, availability of alternatives, and satisfaction (e.g., Breivik & Thorbjornsen, 2008). Others have noted the importance of customers' perceived brand investment, i.e., the extent to which customers believe a brand to invest effort into the customer-brand relationship, as a key determinant of relationship quality (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001). However, few studies have investigated how these two types of investments are related to each other (Morais et al., 2004). More recently Zainol et al. (2014) synthesized these two perspectives to advance a customer-brand relationship investment scale and called upon scholars to investigate the role of brands' and customers' investment in triggering relational outcomes.

The current study responds to this call by integrating literature on relationship investment, including Rusbult's (1980) Relationship Investment Model and Zainol et al.'s (2014) relationship investment scale with identification literature to explicate the linkages between brands' and customers' relationship investment and identification and brand identity fusion. To do so, we draw upon social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) to articulate a theoretically grounded explanation of how brands can stimulate identification and brand identity fusion among their consumers. Additionally, we draw upon the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) to explicate the dynamics between brands' and consumers' investment to demonstrate how perceived brand investment can drive similar investments from customers.

Two overarching arguments underpin the present study. First, we posit that the two types of perceived brand investment, i.e., brand social (indirect) investment and brand economic (direct) investment, as operationalized by Zainol et al. (2014), would trigger the corresponding types of investment from customers, i.e., extrinsic (indirect) and intrinsic (direct) investment respectively, thus contributing to relationship investment literature. Second, we argue, based on current literature, that both types of perceived brand investment and customer investment influence customers' identification and brand identity fusion, and that customer investment mediates the relationship between the respective brand investment and the two outcome variables. In so doing, this study advances identity and identification literature by integrating it with relationship investment scholarship and answers Krishna and Kim's (2020) call to present theoretically driven explanations for drivers of identification and brand identity fusion. In the sections that follow, we present the theoretical foundations of our framework and articulate our hypotheses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relationship Investment

Customer-brand relationships (CBR) have been investigated by several disciplines, from consumer psychology (e.g., Lin & Sung, 2014), consumer marketing (e.g., Fournier, 1998) to public relations (e.g., Krishna et al., 2021). An area of research that has received scholarly attention recently is the idea of relationship investment (e.g., Zainol et al., 2014). Although research on relationship investment as a construct goes back several decades (e.g., Rusbult, 1983), it was not until recently that its potential as a "better predictor of customer intention to establish a relationship with a brand" was posited (see Sung & Campbell, 2009; Zainol et al., 2014, p. 319). Crystallizing previous scholarship on relationship investment, Zainol et al. (2014) combined the two broad conceptualizations of the construct, which are discussed next.

2.1.1 Perceived Brand Investment vs. Customer Investment

Traditional conceptualizations of relationship investment tend to focus either on customers' perceived own investment (POI; e.g., Rusbult, 1983) or on perceived partner investment (PPI; e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001). Whereas POI focuses on a relational partner's (Le &Agnew, 2003), in the case of the present study, consumers' perceptions of their *own* efforts into developing and maintaining a relationship with a brand, PPI refers to customers' perceptions of the efforts made by the *brand* to maintain a relationship with them, the customers. As Zainol et al. (2014) noted, POI refers to "the customer's overall perception of the extent to which he or she has already invested in a relationship with the company, seller or brand" (p. 320), taking into consideration consumers' perceptions of their own efforts into the relationship. Stemming from Rusbult's (1980) Relationship Investment Model, which theorized that individuals make relational stay/leave decisions based on their relational satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and the extent to which they have invested direct and indirect resources into the relationship, POI has recently found use in the relationship marketing literature to understand how it impacts organizational outcomes, including customer engagement (e.g., Zainol et al., 2016), loyalty (e.g., Morais, et al., 2004), and commitment (e.g., Giovanis, 2016).

On the other hand, PPI refers to a "customer's overall perception of the extent to which a brand actively devotes resources and makes efforts that are aimed at retaining the existing customer in a relationship with the brand" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324). De Wulf et al. (2001) drew upon the principle of reciprocity to posit that the "constructs of relationship quality and behavioral loyalty, embodying consumers' reciprocation of a retailer's investments, reflect the extent to which consumers want to maintain their relationship" (p. 34). In other words, customers' perception of the extent of retailers' investment into the relationship may trigger reciprocal efforts, specifically in the form of relationship quality and loyalty (De Wulf et al., 2001), reflecting Bagozzi's (1995) proposition that customers' loyalty stems from a reciprocation of sellers' investments into the relationship. Furthermore, Morais et al. (2004) too drew upon the reciprocity principle to demonstrate the relationship between perceived partner investment and perceived customer investment, and found that customers' perceptions of brand investment into the relationship resulted in similar, equitable investments into the relationship from the customer.

Furthermore, discussions on POI and PPI also seek to understand different types of investment. Although different terms and classifications abound, most classifications of customer investment focus on the nature of the investment. For instance, Rusbult's (1983) classification distinguished between direct and indirect POI, wherein direct or intrinsic investment refer to tangible efforts put into the relationship, whereas indirect or extrinsic investment refer to emotional, intangible and/or social efforts invested by the customer. Alternatively referred to as direct or indirect (e.g., Rusbult, 1983), intrinsic or extrinsic (e.g., Zainol et al., 2014), and tangible or intangible investments (e.g., Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008), both types of investments reported by customers have been shown to be associated with increased loyalty (Morais et al., 2003) and commitment (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008; Sung & Campbell, 2009).

These two types of customer investments deserve further explication. Direct or intrinsic investments are conceptualized as tangible "resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end," (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359), which, in the context of customer-brand relationships, include time, money, and effort to learn about the product (Zainol et al., 2014). Indirect or extrinsic investments, on the other hand, are those that are "originally extraneous resources such as mutual friends, personal identity or shared material possessions become attached to the relationship" (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359), and may include intangible resources such as memories, personal identity, and social groups and status (Zainol et al., 2014). Dorsch and Carlson (1996) too differentiated between tangible and intangible customer investment, and referred to tangible investment made by the customer as economic investment, and intangible customer investment as social investment. In the present study we adopt Zainol et al.'s (2014) typology of customer intrinsic and extrinsic investment where customer intrinsic investment is defined as "the customer's perception of the magnitude and importance of resources that are directly put into the relationship with the brand" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324), whereas customer extrinsic investment refers to "the customer's perception of the magnitude and importance of extraneous resources that are attached to a relationship with a brand" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324).

Similarly, PPI or customers' perceived brand investment has also been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct consisting of two types. For example, Moon and Bonney (2007) differentiated between customers' and sellers' intrinsic and extrinsic investment, noting that both buyers and sellers' intrinsic and extrinsic investment into the relationship impacts their respective levels of commitment to the relationship. Although scholars have discussed tangible and intangible PPIs in ways that are similar to discussions of types of POIs (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001), other research (e.g. Zainol et al., 2014) talks about brand investment consisting of economic and social investment. Economic investments are efforts made by brands to build functional connections with the customer in the form of providing them with quality products and services, discounts, and so on, all in the pursuit of economic gain for the company. Social investment on the other hand refers to efforts by brands to build emotional connections with their customers.

However, as Zainol et al. (2014) noted, there is a lack of studies that explore tangible (economic) and intangible (social) investments both from consumers and brands. Although some studies have examined customer and brand investments as multi-dimensional constructs (e.g., social and economic resources in B2B relationships: Bolton et al., 2003; intrinsic and extrinsic buyer and seller investment: Moon & Bonney, 2007; Zainol et al., 2014, 2016, 2018), scholarship on the topic of customer and brand investments and their respective dimensions is still nascent. In particular, a question that remains unanswered is how the two dimensions of perceived brand investment are related to those of customers' own investment. Although prior research has demonstrated the relationship between perceived brand investment and customers' own investment (e.g., Morais et al. 2004), the relationship between perceived brand economic and social investment and customers' intrinsic and extrinsic investment has not yet been examined, a gap that this study seeks to address.

To do so, we draw upon social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) which posits that social behavior occurs as a result of exchange of activities and resources, tangible and intangible, between two parties. Specifically, the principle of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) may provide insight into the relationships between these constructs. As Morais et al. (2004) stated, "When customers perceive that they have been helped, they tend to feel indebted and may feel compelled to provide retribution" (p. 237). Extending this logic, Morais et al. (2004) argue that when customers believe providers (or brands) to have invested resources into them, they may feel the need to reciprocate the investment and contribute resources to the relationship as well. Indeed, Morais et al. (2004) found that customers' perceptions of brands' investment into the relationship resulted in increased investment into the relationship from the customers themselves. Furthermore, Morais et al. (2004) argued that perceived brand investments may compel customers to make *similar* and *equitable* investments into the relationship.

In this study we extend Morais et al.'s (2004) finding by understanding the relationships between perceived brand social and economic investments, and customers' intrinsic and extrinsic investments. Based on the notion of reciprocity and Morais et al.'s (2004) argument that customers make *similar* investments to what they perceive brands to make, we posit that perceived brand economic investment will drive customers to make intrinsic (tangible, direct) investment, whereas perceived brand social investment will encourage customers' extrinsic (intangible, indirect) investment. Indeed, in the business literature, customers' tangible (intrinsic) investment and intangible (extrinsic) investment have been referred to as customers' economic and social investment respectively (Dorsch & Carlson, 1996). Furthermore, Dorsch and Carlson (1996) argued that "retailers may be more likely to gain customers' social investments by making social investments in the customers" (p. 257). It would thus follow that customers' perception of a brand's economic and social investment into the relationship would then encourage customers' own respective types of investment. Therefore, the following hypotheses are posited:

H1: Perceived brand economic investment is positively associated with perceived intrinsic customer investment.

H2: Perceived brand social investment is positively associated with perceived customer extrinsic investment.

2.2 Organizational Outcomes: Identification and Brand Identity Fusion

Most studies examining the consequences of relationship investment, whether from the customer or from the brand, tend to focus on outcomes such as customer satisfaction (e.g., Bolton et al., 2003), loyalty (Morais et al., 2004), engagement (e.g., Zainol et al., 2016), and commitment (e.g., Giovanis, 2016). Indeed, Rusbult's (1980; 1983) relationship investment model, the foundation for much customer investment scholarship (Le & Agnew, 2003), posited commitment as the key attitudinal variable in determining relational stay/leave decision making. Beyond such attitudinal (e.g., commitment; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006) and behavioral (e.g., engagement; Zainol et al., 2016) outcomes, cognitive and perceptual organizational outcomes too deserve attention (Van Kippenberg & Sleebos, 2006) vis-à-vis relationship investment.

Scholars have identified the value of the social identity approach in understanding organizational outcomes (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Specifically, the concept of organizational (or consumer-company) identification has been posited as the "primary psychological substrate" for a high-quality customer-brand relationship that organizations aim to cultivate with their customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 76). Thus, for relationship investment to result in high quality relationships with customers, as is the purpose of relationship investment from both customers and brands (Morais, et al., 2004), organizational identification may be the necessary psychological condition (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Furthermore, recent theoretical developments in identity literature have yielded the conceptualization of *brand identity fusion* as a key construct (Lin & Sung, 2014), which represents a strong emotional attachment to a brand and is a "stronger predictor of consumer relationship-sustaining behaviors" (p. 55). Thus, in this study we integrate relationship investment literature with social identity approaches to organizational outcomes by focusing on two indicators of a connection between a customer and a brand, i.e., *identification* and *brand identity fusion*. The conceptual differences between these two constructs are explained next, followed by an articulation of the hypotheses.

2.2.1 Brand Identification and Brand Identity Fusion

To investigate how brand investment and customer investment contribute to the strong relational outcomes, we turn to identification and identity literature. Theories on social identity (e.g., Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005) and organizational identification (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989) have provided useful insights into consumer behavior. The central postulate of social identity theory is that the self-concept consists not only of one's personal identity, but also one's individual traits and characteristics, as well as one's social identity which encompasses one's group affiliations and membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), including relationships with organizations (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Drawing upon social identity theory, Mael and Ashforth (1992) posited the notion of organizational identification as a "specific form of social identification where the individual defines himself or herself in terms of their membership in a particular organization" (p. 105).

Although the original applications of organizational identification were in intra-organizational contexts (e.g., employee retention and turnover: Mael & Ashforth, 1995; change management during mergers: Terry & Callan, 1998), where group membership is formal and defined, social identity theory accounts for social identification with a group or organization even without formal interaction or membership (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brewer, 1991). Consumer-brand identification, or consumers' "perception of sameness between the brand (signifying an object with symbolic meanings) and the consumer" (Tuškej, Golob, & Podnar, 2013, p. 54) is one such form of group identification that may occur without formal membership or interaction with the brand, and instead to fulfil customers' self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012).

Such consumer-brand identification has been found to positively influence a number of organizational outcomes including customer trust (He, Li & Harris, 2012), loyalty (He & Li, 2011), advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) and repurchase likelihood (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008). Highly identified customers are also more willing to pay a premium price for the brand (Del Rio, Vasquez, & Iglesias, 2001). Furthermore, Tuškej, Golob, and Podnar (2013) found consumers' identification to be positively associated with brand commitment and positive word-of-mouth behavior. Indeed, as Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) note, "encouraging identification may be not only a good employee retention strategy but also, under certain conditions, a good customer retention one" (p. 86). Thus, investing resources into encouraging customers' identification has been found to reap positive results for organizations.

For another form of strong alignment between customers and a brand, we turn to Lin and Sung's (2014) work on *brand identity fusion*. Lin and Sung (2014), drawing upon social psychology literature, suggested that brand identity fusion is a "stronger predictor of consumer relationship-sustaining behaviors" (p. 55). Identity fusion refers to "a powerful union of the personal and social self" (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 57) such that the individual's self-identity and group identity are no longer distinct (Swann et al., 2009). Applying this concept to customer-brand relationship, Lin and Sung (2014) posited the idea of brand identity fusion, i.e., strong feelings of attachment, connection, and oneness between customers and a brand. Krishna and Kim (2020) further clarified the concept of brand identity fusion, defining it as "the merging of individual (customer) and identity of the brand in the mind of the customer such that the individual may see threats to the brand as a threat to one's self" (p. 7).

Unlike the concept of *brand identity*, which "originates from the company, i.e., a company is responsible for creating a differentiated product with unique features" (Nandan, 2005, p. 264), *brand identity fusion* refers to consumers' perceptions of their self-identities in relation to the identity of a brand that they love. Fused people feel strongly connected and committed to a social entity (Lin & Sung, 2014) and for those highly fused consumers, the distinction between self and brand identities is blurred and highly permeable (Lin & Sung, 2014). Such blurring of self and brand identities, i.e., brand identity fusion, represents a strong emotional connection between the customer and the brand to the extent that "highly fused consumers are more likely to be immune to negative effects of brand transgressions than weakly fused consumers" (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 63). Indeed, the power of brand identity fusion in shielding organizations from customer backlash has recently been demonstrated, as Krishna and Kim (2020) found that brand identity fusion not only lowered customers' perceptions of corporate misconduct being morally wrong, it also increased customers' intentions to buy more from the company despite allegations of misconduct.

Furthermore, identity fusion is conceptually distinct from the notion of identification (Swann, Jettan, Gómez, Whitehouse & Bastian, 2012). Highly identified individuals have collective ties to the social entity (Gómez, Brooks, Buhrmester, Vázquez, Jetten, & Swann,

2011) whereas fused individuals have relational ties with the social entity (Gómez et al., 2011). People with relational ties (i.e. fused people) perceive the members of the group as part of a family, while those with collective ties (i.e. identified people) see the group members as interchangeable (Gómez et al., 2011).

Although the dynamics between relationship investment and identity- and identification-related outcomes have not yet been examined, extant literature provides some insights into how these concepts may be connected. As reviewed in earlier sections, both brand and customer investment have been found to positively influence key organizational outcomes, including customer satisfaction (e.g., Bolton et al., 2003), loyalty (Morais et al., 2004), engagement (e.g., Zainol et al., 2016), and commitment (e.g., Giovanis, 2016). Specifically, De Wulf et al. (2001) reported customers' perceived brand investment to be significantly related to their perceived relationship quality with the brand. Other studies (e.g., Sriram & Mummalaneni, 1990) have echoed these findings, noting the value of intangible (i.e., social) brand investments in developing long, more stable relationships with customers. Furthermore, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argued that for organizations to encourage identification among their customers they must engage in meaningful social interactions that help "embed consumers in the organization and make them feel like insiders" (p. 86), i.e., make social investments into the relationship. Given this argument, along with the fact that identification is the "primary psychological substrate" for a deep meaningful consumer-brand relationship (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 76) and that brand identity fusion represents a strong emotional attachment to a brand (Lin & Sung, 2014) leading to "consumer relationship-sustaining behaviors" (p.55), the following hypotheses are posited:

H3: Perceived brand social investment is positively associated with identification (H3a) and brand identity fusion (H3b).

H4: Perceived brand economic investment is positively associated with identification (H4a) and brand identity fusion (H4b).

Similarly, customers' own investment too has been found to significantly predict relational outcomes such as commitment (e.g., Breivik & Thorbjornsen, 2008; Moon & Bonney, 2007) and engagement (Zainol et al., 2016). Scholars have argued that customers' investment into their relationship with a brand has implications for the relationship's role in forming one's identity (Le & Agnew, 2003). However, studies investigating the independent effects of customers' intrinsic and extrinsic investment on relational outcomes have produced mixed results. Whereas Nysveen et al. (2005) found only customers' direct or intrinsic investment to predict their consumption intentions, Goodfriend and Agnew (2008) found only intangible investment to predict commitment. Other studies have demonstrated the value of both intrinsic and extrinsic investment in influencing organizational outcomes (e.g., Zainol et al., 2016). For instance, Morais et al. (2004) found that individuals who invest tangible and intangible resources into their relationship with a brand tended to be more satisfied with their relationship and intended to continue in it for the long term. Thus, we contribute to the scholarship on customer investment and argue that intrinsic and extrinsic investment by the customer will also positively influence the necessary psychological condition of high quality customer-brand relationships, identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), as well as brand identity fusion.

H5: Customers' extrinsic investment is positively associated with brand identification (H5a) and brand identity fusion (H5b).

H6: Customers' intrinsic investment is positively associated with brand identification (H6a) and brand identity fusion (H6b).

Furthermore, in testing the relationships between brand and customer investment and organizational outcomes, Morais et al. (2004) found that perceived customer investment mediates the relationship between perceived brand investment and customer loyalty. In this study we extend Morais et al.'s (2004) work by positing the following hypotheses:

H7: Customer extrinsic investment mediates the relationship between brand social investment and brand identification (a) and brand identity fusion (b)

H8: Customer intrinsic investment mediates the relationship between brand economic investment and brand identification (a) and brand identity fusion (b)

However, as discussed earlier, the two constructs, brand identification and brand identity fusion, should be considered carefully and clarified. Compared to highly identified people with collective ties with the brand, highly brand-fused people have strong feelings of connectedness, oneness with, and commitment to the brand in addition to their collective bonding to the brand. While highly identified people may change their level of identification with the brand depending on the context (Lin & Sung, 2014), highly fused people maintain a "powerful sense of connectedness" (Gómez et al., 2011, p. 919) regardless of contextual changes since their strong personal identities are so closely tied to that of the entity/group (Lin & Sung, 2014; Swann et al., 2012). And yet, highly fused individuals maintain a strong sense of self which is reinforced by their group and personal identities (Swann et al., 2009). They are motivated to support, sacrifice, and even fight for the social entity (Gómez et al., 2011; Swann et al., 2009). Based on this literature review, brand identity fusion may be interpreted as a stronger form of customer-brand connection than customer-brand identification, with brand identification being a necessary precursor to fusion. We therefore expect that customers' brand identification will mediate between the two types of customer investment and brand identity fusion. Therefore, the following hypotheses are postulated:

H9: Brand identification is positively associated with brand identity fusion.

H10: Brand identification mediates the relationship between the four types of investments and brand identity fusion.

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, an online survey using Qualtrics' online platform and research panels was conducted in October 2018 (N = 595). After removing incomplete responses and missing data for the variables of interest, a final sample of n = 559 remained. The sample was restricted to Australian citizens, and a quota-sampling design based on age and gender was used to ensure that the sample reflected the Australian population distribution (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Respondents were first asked whether they own a mobile phone and if yes, what brand they use. Those who responded "I don't have my own mobile phone" were eliminated from this analysis, because such individuals would be unable to answer questions regarding the variables of interest in this study.

Those who reported using mobile phones were asked several questions to assess their feelings about the brand, including their identification and brand identity fusion. The cellphone industry was chosen for several reasons. First, the ubiquitous nature of cellphones in Australia means that the results of this study may be applicable to a large percentage of the Australian population. Indeed, over 91% of the Australian population is estimated to use a cellphone ("Mobile Consumer Survey 2019," n.d.). Second, cellphone brands, particularly Apple and Samsung which are reportedly used by over 76% of Australian cellphone users ("Mobile Consumer Survey 2019," n.d.), have been shown to engender identification and fandom among their users (Campbell & La Pastina, 2010), making the industry particularly relevant for the present study. Furthermore, the heavy marketing around cellphone accessories, such as the Apple Watch, Air Pods, Samsung Watch, chargers etc. mean that although cell phone purchases may be relatively infrequent, consumers are faced with purchasing opportunities from their cell phone brands more often than may be assumed.

The age distribution of the sample is reported in Table 1. Of the participants, 271 self-reported being male and 287 said they identified as female, with one respondent choosing not to identify their gender. Echoing the 2019 Mobile Consumer Survey, 74% of the participants reported using either Apple (n = 209; 39.65%) or Samsung (n = 174; 33%) cellphones. HTC, Huawei, LG, Sony, and Google Pixel each garnered under 3% each of the market share in our sample. The survey was set up such that participants' chosen cell phone brand name appeared in the survey questions automatically, making it essential for participants to report which cell phone brand they currently use.

[Insert Table 1]

3.2 Survey Procedures and Measures

Upon choosing the mobile brand that they use, participants responded to a series of questions about their demographics, followed by their current relationship, and their investment efforts about the chosen brand. The design of the survey and operationalization of various constructs were made based on extant literature, as explained below. All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, running from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

The measures for brand economic and social investment as well as customers' intrinsic and extrinsic investment were all adapted from Zainol et al.'s (2016) work. The scale was adapted from Zainol et al (2016) rather than Zainol et al. (2014) because the former further refined and updated the relationship investment scale proposed by Zainol et al. (2014), most notably by dropping two items from the measurement of customer intrinsic investment and one item from customer extrinsic investment. Furthermore, an additional item measuring brand economic investment, i.e., "X resolves my communication problem" (Zainol et al., 2014., p. 336) was dropped after the soft launch (discussed further in section 3.4) as it was found not to resonate with Australian participants. Brand identification was measured using six items adapted from Mael and Ashforth's (1992) organizational identification scale. Lin and Sung's (2014) seven statements were used to measure brand identity fusion (see Table 2). All conceptual definitions, measurement items and a summary of Cronbach's alpha, means, and standard deviations are provided in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

3.3 Data Analysis

Structural equation modelling (SEM) with bootstrapping (resampling = 500) was used for data analysis. All data analyses were conducted using Stata IC/14. To assess data fit, Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint-criteria was used, whereby CFI > .95, SRMR ≤ .10, or RMSEA ≤ .06 and SRMR ≤ .10 is considered a good model.

3.4 Assessment of Common Method Variance

Given that the all variables are perceptual measures and both independent and dependent variables were derived from the same participants (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986), common method variance (CMV) or "variance that is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures present" (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p. 879) was assessed. Scholars have suggested several procedural (e.g., Chang, van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010) and statistical (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2003) tactics to minimize and test for common method variance. A number of procedural strategies were adopted to minimize CMV. First, participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and assured that there were no right or wrong answers to ensure that they answer as honestly as possible. Second, measurement items were tested and refined after the soft launch, i.e., after first 50 responses had been collected, following which measurement items were clarified or removed. Third, attention checks were added to ensure participants were paying attention to the questions, and those who failed the attention checks were removed from analysis. These procedural remedies served to minimize CMV in the data collection process.

To check for CMV once data have been collected, the most commonly used statistical method is Harman's single-factor test (Chang et al., 2010). Although the effectiveness of Harman's single-factor test in determining the presence of CMV has been questioned (e.g., Aguirre-Urreta & Hu, 2019), using Harman's single-factor test in conjunction with procedural remedies is generally considered an acceptable strategy. Following Ozdemir et al. (2020), a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with all measurement items loading on to one latent factor. The resultant CFA was found to have poor fit ($\chi^2(560) = 5480.455$, $p < .001$; CFI = .669; RMSEA = .125; SRMR = .102). Furthermore, a CFA with measurment items loading on to their respective latent variables (i.e., the measurement model) was found to have good fit ($\chi^2(410) = 1051.855$, $p < .001$; CFI = .953; RMSEA = .053; SRMR = .047), thus supporting a six-factor model. These procedural and statistical remedies suggest that CMV may not be an issue in this study (Zainol et al., 2016).

4. Results

Kline's (1998) two-step procedure was utilized to test the hypotheses. First, the measurement model that included all studied variables was tested. The measurement model was found to have good fit with CFI = .953, SRMR = .053 and RMSEA = .047 ($\chi^2(410) = 1051.855$, $p < .001$). The structural model (see Figure 1) was then tested using bootstrapping procedures and was found to have acceptable fit, with CFI = .936, SRMR = .067, and RMSEA = .060 ($\chi2(455) = 1379.99$, $p < .001$). However, in accordance with best practices in testing mediations, a rival model containing only direct paths to the two outcome variables was tested (Bagozzi et al., 1998; De Wulf et al., 2001). The rival model (see Figure 2) failed to fit and was therefore rejected. The proposed model (Figure 1) was thus accepted and analyzed. Beta coefficients were analyzed to test the hypothesized paths. Additionally, brand was added as a control variable and was found to have no effect in the model.

[Insert Figures 1 and 2]

H1 predicted a positive relationship between perceived brand economic investment and customer intrinsic investment, and was supported ($\beta = .54$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$). Support was found for H2 as well, as customer extrinsic investment was positively predicted by brand social investment ($\beta = .71$, $SE = .03$, $p < .001$). Although H3a was not supported, brand social investment was found to predict brand identity fusion ($\beta = .34$, $SE = .09$, $p < .001$). Then, neither H4a nor H4b were supported, as brand economic investment was found to be unrelated to both identification and brand identity fusion (see Table 3 for a summary of direct, indirect, and total effects as well as unstandardized and standardized coefficients). Customer extrinsic investment was found to predict both identification ($\beta = .56$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) and brand identity fusion ($\beta = .24$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), providing support for H5a and H5b. However, no such support was found for H6a and H6b, as identification and brand identity fusion remained unaffected by customer intrinsic investment. H9 too was supported as identification was positively associated with brand identity fusion ($\beta = .54$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$).

[Insert Table 3]

Following the analysis of the direct paths, the mediation effects were analyzed. Although brand social investment was not directly associated with identification, the indirect effect was found to be significant ($\beta = .40$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$), supporting H7a. Customer extrinsic investment was found to fully mediate the relationship between brand social investment and identification . However, extrinsic investment only partially mediated the relationship between brand social investment and brand identity fusion, providing partial support for H7b. Neither H8a nor H8b were supported. Finally, identification was found to partially mediate the relationship between brand social investment and brand identity fusion as well as customer extrinsic investment and brand identity fusion (see Table 3 for summary of direct, indirect, and total effects).

5. Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand the dynamics between customers' own and perceived brand investment, and the impact of such investment on relational outcomes, i.e., identification and brand identity fusion. To do so, an online survey was conducted among a nationally representative sample of Australians in October 2018. The results revealed that when customers perceive a brand to make economic and social investment into customer-brand relationships, they tend to reciprocate those efforts with similar types of investment. Furthermore, perceived brand social investment and customer extrinsic investment further engender customers' identification with the brand as well as brand identity fusion. This study provides important significant insights for scholars and marketers, which are discussed next.

5.1 Contributions to the Literature

This study has several theoretical implications. First, we advance the literature on relationship investment by revealing the effect of customers' perceived brand investment on their own investment into the customer-brand relationship. As hypothesized, customers' perceived brand social investment was found to predict their extrinsic investment whereas their perceived brand economic investment was found to be associated with customers' intrinsic investment. These findings echo Morais et al.'s (2004) argument that "when individuals receive a specific type of resource, they tend to want to give an identical type of resource in return" (p. 241). To our knowledge this is the first study to connect the two types of brand investment as explicated by Zainol et al. (2014) to the respective types of customers' own investment, and provide support for Dorsch and Carlson's (1996) proposition that brands' social investments are likely to drive customers' own social investment into the relationship. Furthermore, the results of this study provide additional support for a multidimensional conceptualization of both PPI and POI, as operationalized by Zainol et al. (2014).

Second, the empirical analyses strongly support the power of brands' social investment in driving positive organizational outcomes. Specifically, the results revealed that perceived brand social investment drives not only customers' extrinsic investment into the brand, but also their brand identity fusion. Additionally, although brand social investment did not directly predict identification, it did indirectly influence identification, as customers' extrinsic investment was found to mediate this relationship.

These findings have profound implications for relationship investment and identity scholarship. Although organizational identification is a relatively well-studied construct in management literature (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Scott, 2007), the same cannot be said for brand identity fusion. And yet, brand identity fusion has been shown to act as a powerful immunity-granting force for organizations (Krishna & Kim, 2020). Specifically, Lin and Sung (2014) demonstrated the cognitive power of brand identity fusion when they noted that "highly fused consumers are more likely to be immune to negative effects of brand transgressions than weakly fused consumers" (p. 63). As Swann et al. (2012) indicated, highly fused individuals tend to stay loyal and committed despite changes in the group's (in this case brand's) situation. Krishna and Kim (2020) provided support for such loyalty immunity-granting power afforded by brand identity fusion. Thus, understanding how organizations can help generate such brand identity fusion among their customers a key question that this study sought to answer.

As revealed by the results of this study, the extent to which customers perceive brands to invest in making emotional (rather than functional) connections with their customers may be a crucial driver of customers' identification and brand identity fusion. This finding is in line with relationship marketing scholarship that has suggested the importance of making intangible investments into consumers to encourage relational outcomes (e.g., Choi et al., 2008; Morais et al. 2004; Kim & Krishna, 2017). Indeed, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) underscored the importance of making customers feel like insiders through meaningful social interaction to help encourage customers' identification with the brand, an insight that was supported in this study.

Furthermore, customers' own extrinsic investment was also found to positively impact identification and brand identity fusion, as well as mediate between the outcomes and brand social investment. Dorsch and Carlson (1996) argued that customers' social (extrinsic) investment into a brand decreases the social distance between the two parties, resulting in more social intimacy between the customer and the brand. Such social intimacy may lead the customer becoming a "strong supporter and advocate" (Dorsch & Carlson, 1996, p. 257) of the brand, as was demonstrated in this study. Thus, this study served to provide strong and robust empirical support for Morais et al. (2004) and Dorsch and Carlson's (1996) arguments about the power of intangible, social investments from both brands and customers in driving positive cognitive organizational outcomes.

Third, the results of this study also demonstrate the limited impact of tangible investments, both from customers and brands, in helping generate customers' identification with the brand and their brand identity fusion. In line with prior scholarship (e.g., Zainol et al. 2016), brand economic investment was found not to be significantly related to identification and brand identity fusion. Customers' intrinsic investment was found to have no impact on identification and brand identity fusion, echoing Goodfriend and Agnew's (2008) argument about the power of intangible investments over tangible investments. A possible explanation for these unsupported hypotheses may lie in the principle of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). Brands' perceived efforts to build functional relationships with customers do trigger similar types of reciprocal investment efforts from customers, as demonstrated in this study, but neither brands' perceived economic efforts not customers' own intrinsic investment were found to evoke the self-definitional need fulfilment necessary for identification management

(Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Instead, such need fulfilment may have been triggered by perceived brand social investment and the resultant extrinsic investment from the customer through the development of social intimacy between the customer and the brand, leading to identification and brand identity fusion.

5.2 Managerial Implications

Marketers continually aim to build deeper, sustainable relationships with their customers. This study has three practical implications for marketers who are interested in cultivating such sustainable customer-brand relationships. First, the findings on the limited impact of brand economic investment imply that brands' economic investment efforts in providing quality products or services are important, but only in encouraging reciprocal intrinsic efforts from customers. Simply providing high quality products and services is not enough to help build emotional connections and sustainable relationships that are crucial for long-term success. Whereas making sure that customers have access to high quality products, services and support is certainly a necessary condition for a customer-brand relationship to develop, particularly in the hyper-competitive smartphone industry, the results of this study demonstrate that it is not a sufficient condition. For customers to develop a feeling of oneness and a deep bond with a brand, economic investment must be coupled with social investment. Thus, marketers and brand managers may find these results useful for devising their relationship marketing strategies to ensure a focus on social investment efforts, as well as evaluating issues with existing campaigns to diagnose why they may not have been successful.

Second, the results of this study demonstrate how marketers can encourage customers' investment into the customer-brand relationship. As was revealed in the results of this study, when customers perceive brands to invest certain types of resources into the relationship, they tend to reciprocate that investment by also investing similar resources. In other words, by investing resources into making social and emotional connections with their customers, brands can encourage customers' extrinsic investment, which in turn contributes to the development of a deep emotional attachment between the customer and the brand, i.e., brand identity fusion. Similarly, investing economic resources triggers customers' intrinsic or direct investment into the customer-brand relationship. Although customers' intrinsic investment was found to be unrelated to identification and brand identity fusion, it is nonetheless an important pre-condition for the establishment of a customer-brand relationship. Brands can drive customers' direct investment of time, money and effort by making economic investments into the relationship themselves.

Third, although there are no clear shortcuts to cultivating brand identity fusion among customers, the findings indicate that a brand's social investment into their relationships with customers will pay off in the long term, as customers may develop strong feelings of attachment, connection, and oneness with the brand (i.e. brand identity fusion). In times of organizational crisis, these fused customers will act as powerful brand advocates to shield the brand from any possible backlash (Krishna & Kim, 2020). Thus, brand identity fusion may be the "ultimate destination for consumer brand relationships" (Lin & Sung, 2014, p. 55) that brand managers should aim to achieve. Although customers' strong identification with a brand may engender several benefits such as loyalty (He & Li, 2011), advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012) and repurchase likelihood (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2008), highly identified people may change their level of identification with the brand depending on the context (Lin & Sung, 2014). However, highly fused customers have been found continue to support the brand regardless of contextual changes (Lin & Sung, 2014; Swann et al., 2012), making them powerful advocates for the brand. Brands' efforts to build emotional connections with customers, i.e., social investment, may help drive the development of such identity fusion between the customer and the brand, as demonstrated in this study.

5.3 Limitations

Like any social scientific endeavour, this study does have a few limitations. First, these results are only generalizable to the population of Australian citizens that are members of Qualtrics' research panels. Although every effort was made to ensure that the sample was representative of the Australian population at least by age and gender, the generalizability of this study's findings should be considered with caution. Second, for the sake of easy readability we have used the terms "brands," "companies," "corporations" etc. interchangeably to refer to for-profit entities that market to customers. We acknowledge that these terms are all conceptually different.

Furthermore, the average level of identification and brand identity fusion reported by participants was relatively low, indicating that at an average, participants did not really experience identification and brand identity fusion with their cell phone brands. However, further investigation of these numbers revealed that although some participants did report high levels of identification and identity fusion, many more disagreed that they identified or felt their identities to be fused with that of their cell phone brand. For example, on the item, "I am one with [brand]" 30% of the participants responded with either 4 or 5, indicating that 30% of the participants agreed with the statement; however, because 40% of the participants responded with 1 or 2, the average score was lower than the mid-point. We strongly believe, however, that this distribution only increases the applicability of the data as our focus is on interpreting β coefficients. Indeed, these numbers point instead to a troubling finding for cell phone companies in Australia, and the need for them to increase their relationship investment efforts in Australia.

Finally, in this study we limited the scope to only include consumer publics, and that too those who use mobile phones. It may be worthwhile to replicate these findings with consumers of different industries beyond the cell phone industry. Future research may also seek to investigate these relationships for different kinds of publics and stakeholders. For example, employees, as members of organizations may also exhibit identity fusion with their employers. Indeed, the concept of organizational identification was originally advanced to understand and explain employee behaviour. Future scholarship may seek to understand how companies can encourage employees' identity fusion as well as the organizational outcomes of employee identity fusion.

Additionally, this study focused specifically on understanding how relationship investment from both brands and customers may impact identification and brand identity fusion. However, other factors may also contribute to increasing customers' identification and brand identity fusion. As noted earlier, scholarship on brand identity fusion and how to encourage it is still in its infancy. Thus, further research is needed to understand how companies can encourage brand identity fusion, as well as how brand identity fusion can contribute to organizational outcomes. Despite these limitations, this study presents a theoretically grounded integration of concepts from social psychology, consumer psychology, and relationship marketing, offering several avenues for future research.

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Tables

Table 1

Distribution of Sample by Age

Age Group	Frequency
18-24	72
25-34	110
35-44	99
45-54	87
55-64	85
65 and older	106

Table 2

Summary of Measurement Items, Reliability Metrics, Means, and Standard Deviations

Variable and Conceptual Definition	Item	Source Citation	Alpha	Mean	SD
Brand Identification: "a specific form of social identification where the individual defines him or herself in terms of their membership in a particular organization" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 105)	When someone criticises [mobile brand name], it feels like a personal insult I am very interested in what others think about [mobile brand name When I talk about [mobile brand name], I usually say "we" rather than "they" The successes of [mobile brand name]are my successes When someone praises [mobile brand name], it feels like a personal compliment If a story in the media criticised [mobile brand name], I would feel embarrassed	Mael and Ashforth (1992)	0.862	2.576	0.909
Brand Identity Fusion: "the merging of individual (customer) and identity of the brand in the	I am one with [mobile brand name] I feel immersed in [mobile brand name] I have a deep emotional bond with [mobile brand name]	Lin and Sung (2014)	0.955	2.518	1.126

mind of the customer such that the individual may see threats to the brand as a threat to one's self" (Krishna & Kim, 2020, p. 7)	[mobile brand name]is me I will do for [mobile brand name] more than any of the other mobile brand fans would do I am strong because of [mobile brand name] I make [mobile brand name] strong				
Brand Economic Investment: "the customer's perception of the brand's efforts aimed at building functional connections, which are easily traced financially and less personal in nature" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324)	[mobile brand name] provides the best deal [mobile brand name] provides the most reliable offering [mobile brand name] understands my needs [mobile brand name] meets my expectations [mobile brand name] makes my spending worthwhile	Zainol et al. (2016)	0.863	3.626	0.778
Brand Social Investment: "the customer's perception of the brand's efforts aimed at building emotional connections, which are hard to trace financially and more personal in nature" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324)	The company that owns [mobile brand name] makes various efforts to improve my relationship with [mobile brand name] [mobile brand name] does what it takes to make me happy [mobile brand name] is very responsive to my needs [mobile brand name] is concerned about meeting my expectation [mobile brand name] establishes an emotional connection with me [mobile brand name] cares about satisfying my needs		0.922	3.157	0.893
Customer Intrinsic Investment: "the customer's perception of the magnitude and importance of resources that are directly put into the relationship with the brand" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324)	I have spent a lot of time using [mobile brand name] I have put a lot of effort to get used to [mobile brand name] I have invested a lot of money to buy [mobile brand name] I have invested a lot of effort in learning how to use [mobile brand name]		0.766	3.531	0.864
Customer Extrinsic Investment: "the customer's perception of the magnitude and importance of extraneous resources that are attached to a relationship with a brand" (Zainol et al., 2014, p. 324)	I have collected a lot of promotional items related to [mobile brand name] Many important events of my life are associated with [mobile brand name] I often remember someone important when using [mobile brand name] I often remember my past memories when using [mobile brand name] I get a lot of new contacts that are also users of [mobile brand name]		0.899	2.671	1.010

Table 3.

Results of Hypothesis Testing

			Direct Effects			Indirect Effects			Total Effects		
Hypothesis	**IV**	**DV**	**b**[1]	**SE**	**β**[2]	**b**	**SE**	**β**	**b**	**SE**	**β**
H1	Brand Economic Investment	Customer Intrinsic Investment	.78***	.11	.54	-	-	-	.78***	.11	.54
H2	Brand Social Investment	Customer Extrinsic Investment	.84***	.06	.71	-	-	-	.84***	.06	.71
H3a	Brand Social Investment	Identification	n.s.	-	-	.35***	.06	.40	.58***	.11	.66
H4a	Brand Economic Investment	Identification	n.s.	-	-	n.s.	-	-	-	-	-
H5a	Customer Extrinsic Investment	Identification	.42***	.07	.56	-	-	-	.42***	.07	.56
H6a	Customer Intrinsic Investment	Identification	n.s.	-	-	n.s.	-	-	-	-	-
H3b	Brand Social Investment	Brand Identity Fusion	.46**	.15	.34	.71***	.10	.52	1.17***	.17	.87
H4b	Brand Economic Investment	Brand Identity Fusion	n.s.	-	-	n.s.	-		-	-	-
H5b	Customer Extrinsic Investment	Brand Identity Fusion	.27**	.09	.24	.34***	.08	.30	.62***	.08	.54
H6b	Customer Intrinsic Investment	Brand Identity Fusion	n.s.	-	-	n.s.	-	-	-	-	-
H9	Identification	Brand Identity Fusion	.82***	.14	.54	-	-	-	.82***	.14	.54

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

[1]Unstandardized coefficients are reported in this column.
[2]Standardized coefficients are reported in this column as well as in Figure 1.

Figures

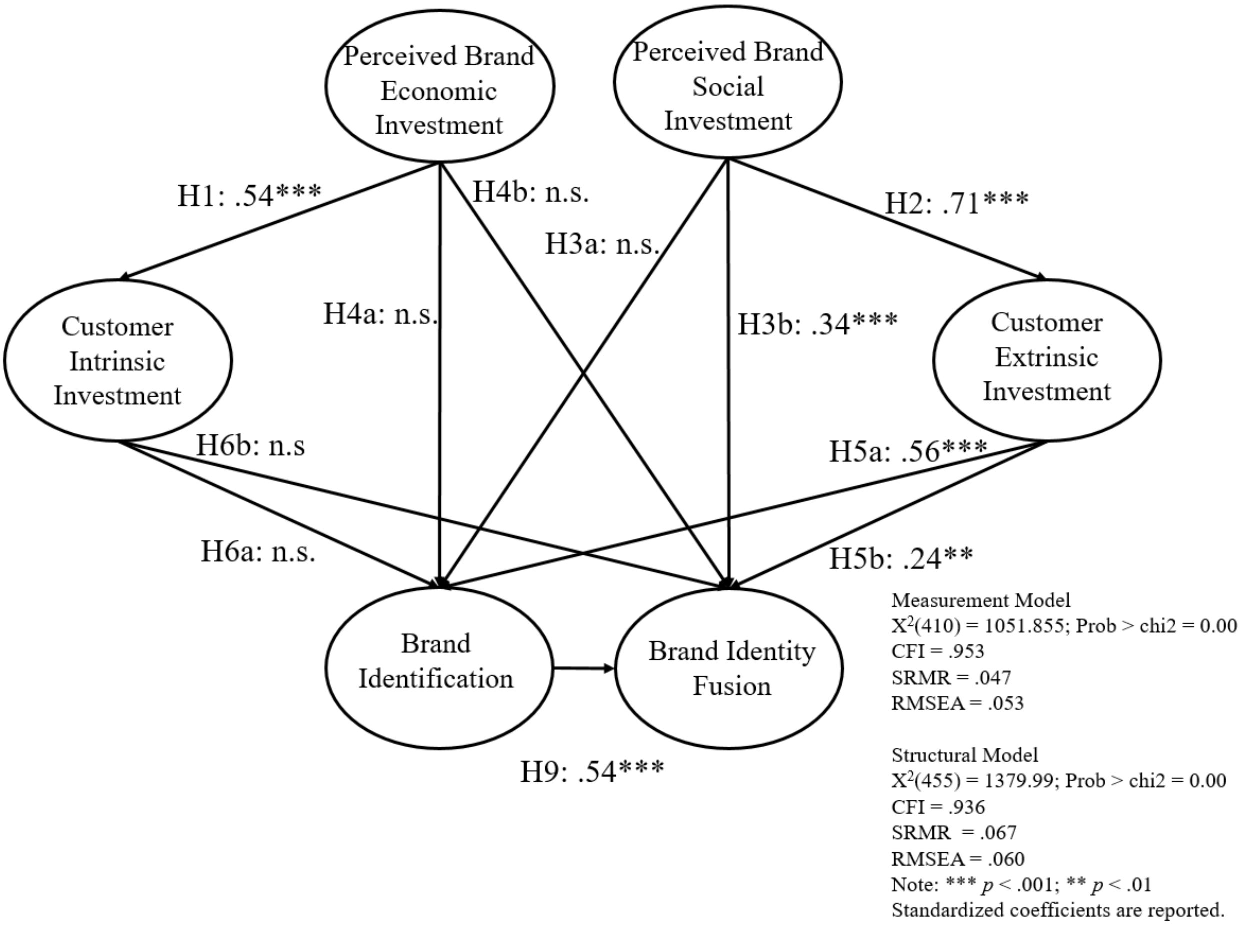

Figure 1. Results of Model Testing.

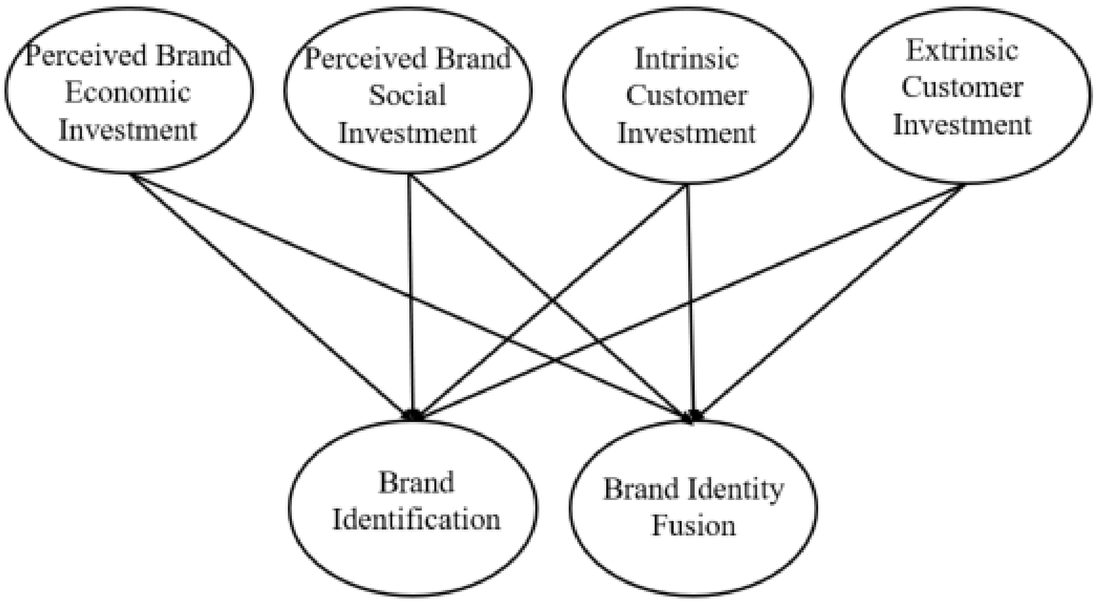

Figure 2. Rival Model